The New Immigration and Beyond

The decade of the 1890s saw the advent of what is called the “new” immigration. The adjective “new” refers not to chronology but, rather, to the countries of origin In general, the focus of immigration shifted from northern and western Europe to southern and eastern Europe. It is possible to overstate this because immigration from northern and western Europe continued. Still, there was a clear-cut shift. The new immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe.

Eight ethnic groups accounted for seventy-five percent of all immigrants from 1899 to 1924—Italians, Jews, Scandinavians, British, Irish, Anglo-Canadians, Germans, and Poles. Of these, the Italians, Jews, and Poles showed the sharpest rates of increase.

The new immigrants tended to be younger and were more likely to be single. They were more likely to see themselves as sojourners rather than as permanent residents, and there was, in fact, a significant remigration rate of thirty to thirty-five percent. These new immigrants became the mainstay of the American industrial system and helped create the quilt of ethnic neighborhoods in cities, particularly those of the northeast.

Why did they come? Perhaps the greatest “pull” factor of all was the growing American need for unskilled industrial labor. The extension of railroads into eastern and southern Europe facilitated the movement of people. To this was coupled the dramatic improvement in oceanic

travel. The rise of the steamships in the 1860s lowered costs and reduced the time of passage. The passenger mortality rate dropped to around two percent in the late nineteenth century.

Perhaps the greatest of the “push” factors was the sharp population explosion in southern and eastern Europe. The population explosion made life in the countryside unendurable for many because the land could not bear such a demographic increase, and the industrial system, which lagged significantly behind that of America, could not absorb those who had been driven from the farms.

In addition to economic and technological factors, there were also political factors which impinged on the life of the people. Jews in Russia were subjected to severe discrimination and isolation. The political situation in southern and eastern Europe was unsettled. Nationalist aspirations of the Slavic peoples increasingly clashed with the policies of the Hapsburg Empire. Poland had ceased to exist as a result of the partitions which had split Poland into fragments governed by Prussia, Austria, and Russia.

The demographic pattern in America was also complicated by massive internal migration of African Americans from the south to the north. Altogether, around two million moved from the south to the north in the period from 1860 to 1930. Most went into northern cities at the same time that the new immigrants were also going there, which added additional ethnic diversity to the urban scene.

There was a long-term evolution during this period in the type of immigrant. The trend was away from agricultural workers toward the unskilled industrial workers. Jews provided an exception to this trend because a significant number had some kind of trade—twenty-five percent were tailors.

Altogether the new immigration dramatically increased the ethnic diversity of the American population and complicated relationships among the various ethnic groups. Despite the tensions of the 1840s and 1850s America's need for immigrants ensured that there would be no strong movement toward immigration restriction. However, even though the need remained great in some ways, after the Civil War restriction was seen by many as increasingly desirable. The closing of the frontier, the rise of European-style social problems, and emerging theories of Social Darwinism and racial superiority caused many to support restriction.

Earlier state efforts to restrict immigration, however, clashed with the Constitution. In 1849 in the *Passenger Cases* the United States Supreme Court overturned restrictive state legislation. Congress itself, however, began the process of restriction by outlawing certain types of undesirable immigrants. In 1885, Congress enacted the Foran Act which prohibited the importation of contract laborers, even though there were more than enough legal immigrants available to function as strikebreakers.

The Chinese were the first to face exclusion. They were not white. They were regarded entirely as unskilled labor ("coolies"), and were often brought in under contract and in debt. After the initial post-Civil War boom in railroad construction ended around 1870, the Chinese were regarded as a more generalized threat to native workers. The U.S. government sought modifications of a treaty of 1868 which had granted free immigration. The Chinese government reluctantly agreed to "temporary" restrictions in 1882. Congress then restricted Chinese immigration for ten years in 1892, and renewed the restriction in 1902 before making it permanent in 1904.

The emerging social problems of the 1870s and 1880s, symbolized by the railroad strike of 1877 and the Haymarket Square riot in Chicago in 1886, caused many Americans to associate immigrants with political and economic radicalism. The American Protective Association, founded by Henry F. Bowers in Iowa, peaked in membership at 1.5 million in 1894. It had a strong anti-Catholic character.

The 1880s and 1890s formed a transitional period in the move toward general immigration restriction. Many Americans realized that the old immigrants were being assimilated, and so their attitudes softened. The advent of the new immigration between the late 1890s and World War I, however, changed the situation significantly. The new immigrants generally were less skilled and had higher illiteracy rates than had been the case with the earlier immigrants.

They came increasingly to be regarded as a "breed apart," isolated from the mainstream of American life. In the case of the Jews, they were not even Christian, and Orthodox Christians were isolated from both the Protestant and the Catholic communities in America. They crowded into cities and changed, many would say degraded, the urban landscape. Although political leaders eventually emerged, the new immigrants were at first politically weak.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the emergence of intellectual movements which seemed to justify concern. The application of Charles Darwin's idea of the survival of the fittest to human society appeared to justify a refusal to aid the weak (unfit) in their struggle for survival. In the early twentieth century the eugenics movement and a new type of "scientific" racism made opposition to the racially unfit intellectually respectable.

The Immigration Restriction League was formed in 1894 and began political agitation for restriction. Only presidential vetoes by Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson prevented Congress from making literacy a requirement for admission. The Dillingham Commission, headed by Senator William Dillingham, issued a massive forty-two-volume report in 1909 which expressed powerful opposition to unrestricted immigration. Restrictionists also obtained a victory by means of the "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1909 which

restriction Japanese immigration. Finally, in 1917 Congress passed a literacy requirement over President Wilson's veto.

World War I triggered an era of hyperpatriotism, just as Wilson had feared, and the nation turned decisively in an isolationist direction after the war. In 1920, people voted for Warren G. Harding and "normalcy" against James M. Cox who represented Woodrow Wilson and international crusades.

This was the atmosphere in which the restrictionists could obtain a decisive victory. The Immigration Act of 1921 limited the annual number to 357,000. But even this did not go far enough for many. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 established the quota system which remained in effect until 1965. This act limited the numbers permitted to each immigrant group to two percent of the number of that group living in America in 1890. Since 1890 was before the advent of the new immigration, the act clearly struck hardest at those coming from southern and eastern Europe. The act went into effect in 1927; it also limited the total annual number to around 150,000. This act ended the era of mass immigration and changed the course of American history as a result.

This restrictionist policy coupled with the effects of the Great Depression significantly reduced the rate of immigration. World War II also depressed immigration. Not even the desperate plight of German Jews during Hitler's Third Reich could cause any significant change in

policy. During the entire period from 1931 through 1945, only 700,000 immigrants came to the United States.

During World War II the nation's need for agricultural labor led to the *bracero* (laborer) program which permitted the influx of temporary workers from Mexico. This program lasted until 1964, and altogether some 4.3 million temporary workers were admitted under its provisions.

In the postwar period there were some modifications of immigration policy to permit the entry of persons displaced by the war. Around 207,000 were admitted in 1948 which was increased to 341,000 in 1950. But these were only minimal concessions in the face of the massive impact of the war, even though most other western nations also adopted restrictionist policies.

Some idea of the impact of restriction can be obtained by a few statistics. From 1925 to 1948 1.9 million immigrants came to the United States. However, this is about the same number as had arrived in the five-year period from 1920 to 1924.

America clearly became more homogeneous as a result of restriction. Americans expected immigrants to conform, to become "American." And, generally, they did, not so much because of any deliberate policies but simply as a consequence of the mere passage of time. Between 1920 and 1960, the number of foreign-language newspaper declined by fifty-eight percent.

There was some evidence of more liberal attitudes after the war. As immigrants became Americanized, the perceived threat diminished. The rise of the Cold War caused people to regard eastern Europeans as the victims of Communism. The threat of atheistic Communism lessened opposition to the Catholic Church. The nightmare of Hitler's Holocaust made it increasingly difficult to justify racism.

Postwar America witnessed the rise of what has been called the triple melting pot of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew as religion tended to replace ethnicity as the category of difference, though with some persistent ethnic implications. The triple melting pot, however, was limited to whites, although some of the same social forces that led to a liberalization of attitudes toward immigrants also came to provide some support for the emerging civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The quota system came under increasing criticism in the postwar period. Finally, the system was overhauled by the Immigration Act of 1965 which abandoned the quota system over a three-year period. The permitted number increased—170,000 a year for eastern Europe and 110,000 for Latin America, for example. The biggest change, however, was the provision which granted asylum to political refugees. In an increasingly volatile world, this had a significant impact. From the mid-1960s to 1980 over one million immigrants came to America in this way. Even so, there was no return to the older era of unrestricted

immigration, and some have argued that the promise of America as the refuge of the world's tired and hungry is not being fulfilled.

The adequacy of the triple melting pot as a way of understanding the complexity of American ethnic history came under increasingly challenge. The presence of African Americans, native Americans, and, increasingly, Hispanics has called this older paradigm into question. Also, some have argued that Catholics lagged behind Jews and Protestants, although most observers have claimed that this ceased to be the case by the mid-1960s.

Since the 1980s, it has become increasingly clear that immigration, legal or otherwise, is becoming increasingly important in American life. The numbers are increasing. From 1960 to 1968 the average was 250,000 a year, while from 1969 to 1976, it was 391,000 a year. Furthermore, the numbers from Africa and Asia are increasing more rapidly than those from Europe.

In addition, there are growing numbers of undocumented immigrants, particularly from Latin America. The Mazzoli-Simpson bill conferred legal status on all undocumented immigrants who had arrived before January 1, 1977, and made all who came between 1977 and 1980 temporary resident aliens. Recent trends, however, have convinced many that there can be no workable solution that does not involve control of our borders, while others stress that stronger Latin American national economies would decrease all forms of immigration. So the debate

continues, and immigration remains a perennial issue in our national history.